

The Challenges of Assignment Design in Discipline-Based Freshman Writing Classes



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A current trend among research universities is the revision of freshman writing programs. Sequences of English Department courses taught by reluctant graduate students or adjunct faculty are being replaced by a writing-in-the-disciplines approach whereby faculty members are recruited from various departments to teach writing-intensive on themes or topics essential to their particular discipline. This shift is a response to growing frustration among professors across the disciplines to the poor writing done by students even in upper-level courses. In a recent article, a lecturer in Princeton's new writing program notes that while students are rather good at doing basic research, they are not sure what to do with the assembled materials: "Almost none of [the students] are capable of turning [these materials] into a real paper with a thesis and an argument" (Bartlett A39-40).

Interestingly, the new writing courses, while often taught by faculty trained in disciplines other than English, do not emphasize the specifics of writing in a particular discipline as opposed to others. Instead, the courses are "writing-intensive," the assumption being that writing is more or less a generic skill best taught in a course focused on a particular topic or set of ideas by an instructor who is both deeply engaged in the topic and interested in coaching writing. Notably, one of the best-established and most highly regarded curricula, Cornell's John S. Knight Writing Program, appears to minimize the effect of disciplinary training on the *teaching* of writing, even as it acknowledges the distinct "stylistic and rhetorical dimensions of conceptual investigation" that inform each field of study (Bogel and Gottshalk 11). The four types of courses described by past Knight program administrators as examples of how to integrate writing instruction with subject matter are all interdisciplinary in content, and two are focused on ways of thinking in different disciplines. But the only mention of the qualifications desirable in faculty members recruited to teach such courses is a reference to "broad competence" and "experience" (18).

Perhaps this is because the program is grounded in the assumption that writing in itself is not a disciplinary specialty: "writing is not primarily an academic field, a body of theory and information" (9) (a claim strikingly at odds with the rise of doctoral programs in Composition and Rhetoric and with the thinking of institutions that hire such specialists to direct writing programs and tutoring centers). Certainly, few writing instructors would disagree with the observation "that the best writing teachers are not necessarily those who have read the most about the history of rhetoric and the nature of the composing process" (9). And students themselves recognize the benefits of learning to write in specific academic contexts: In a study by Richard Light, based on data from students and faculties from more than twenty colleges and universities, seniors unanimously agreed that "they learn most effectively *when writing instruction is organized around a substantive discipline*" (59, italics in original). Given the current movement toward restructuring freshman English to exploit this benefit, one feels compelled to ask whether broad multidisciplinary competence and some experience in "teaching writing" (however that is defined) is sufficient for effective writing pedagogy.

What it means to actually teach someone else how to write in the way that most professors would like students to do in upper-level courses—i.e., how to synthesize disparate items of research into a lucid and focused essay or report advancing a persuasive, non-obvious idea—is, of course, the question that bedevils. While not presuming to answer that complex question here, I would like to consider some related ones that I think underlie it, questions that are implicit in the move to revise writing programs to include experts from across the curriculum: To what extent do discipline-grounded epistemologies—ways of thinking common to experts in a particular field—shape assumptions about the design of writing assignments? And how do these assumptions affect students' ability to practice the sorts of high-level composing professors say they want?

Because these questions involve matters of consciousness, intentionality, and meta-cognition, they do not lend themselves easily to research that provides definitive answers. However, some descriptive studies have yielded compelling evidence of the essential role played by disciplinary epistemologies in shaping the tacit expectations of professors. Gregory Colomb, for example, has analyzed the responses of faculty members to samples of students' writing (in several instances, a range of responses to the same assignment). These samples differed from each other in ways*, that, although noticeable and of crucial importance to experts in the relevant discipline, were difficult to define. As a result, faculty judgments of student writing were based on criteria that remained occult to students. Colomb observes that the "basics" in writing are often focused on sentence grammar, when it is "text grammar," —

e.g., what to specify, what to take for granted, what counts as a point or as evidence, how evidence is best organized for a particular purpose, what “voice” is appropriate to the task—that students need to know to begin to be successful. And this text grammar cannot be abstracted from an area of expertise (7). He concludes that “our judgments of writing and thinking are tied to...subtle disciplinary cues” (18) that we rarely articulate because we take for granted and expect students to simply “get it.” Colomb’s conclusions are given point by Walvoord and McCarthy’s meticulous analysis of students’ writing in four disciplines, in which carefully assembled qualitative data reveal how students cope with the challenge of recognizing and addressing the implicit disciplinary constraints of a given assignment. The differing demands placed on students in different discourse communities are vividly apparent, e.g., in a comparison of the teacher’s rhetorical expectations in a business class requiring a “describe/analyze/prescribe model emphasizing] definition” with the debate-oriented thesis/support structure required by a history professor (126-127, 142). Like Golomb, Walvoord and McCarthy illuminate powerfully the challenges students face as they confront writing tasks in different disciplines.

In my own research, the question of whether it makes sense to think of writing primarily as a generic skill acquired increasing urgency as I gathered qualitative data for a study of the relationship between instructors’ expectations in the design of writing assignments and the students’ thinking as evidenced both in their essay responses and in their commentary on the qualities of various writing prompts. In particular, one unexpected piece of data seemed worthy of further investigation: In the process of examining assignment sequences developed by ten writing instructors, I was surprised to learn that two of my colleagues who had happily team-taught an interdisciplinary writing-intensive freshman seminar for several years had recently disagreed intensely on the shape of one assignment. Since this team (an instructor from the English department and one from the History department, both full Professors highly regarded by students and by peers) had always worked beautifully together, I was curious to know the grounds of the disagreement. I wondered what their different perspectives might reveal about the implicit expectations that are embedded in a writing prompt, i.e., professors’ assumptions of what sorts of thinking it should evoke in students. I was also interested in students’ evaluation of the prompt.

What follows is, first, an analysis of the problematic assignment as illuminated by reflections on it by the two professors (each of whom agreed to a separate videotaped interview with me) and by four students at different points in their academic careers, who discussed the prompt as part of a videotaped panel on assignment design. I will argue that this case study, along with other similar examples of faculty attitudes toward the construction of writing prompts, is evidence of the need for a deeper understanding of our own expectations and how they are likely to be (mis)interpreted by students, especially freshmen. Second, by applying to the qualitative data some findings by cognitive researchers, I want to suggest that this understanding on the part of faculty entails consciousness not only of the level of expertise that a successful response would require, but also of epistemological differences among disciplines, including what counts as an interesting or useful “problem” in a particular field. Thus, by looking closely at some specific instances of tension in inter-disciplinary “contact zones” and by showing how research in certain strands of learning theory can help us understand this tension, I hope to highlight some issues that may be increasingly worthy of our attention as the field of composition undergoes a metamorphosis from stepchild of the English department to a focus of interest for a growing number of faculty across the curriculum.

Can This Marriage Be Saved?

As part of my research into how the construction of writing prompts affects student thinking and writing, I videotaped, in May 2001, a discussion among a group of four Honors students—two freshmen, Adrian and Tony, and two seniors, Jon (an English major headed for a highly competitive MFA program in Creative Writing) and Nadine (a political science major planning to attend law school). Before the interview, I asked them to think individually about several freshman writing assignments gathered from a number of different instructors. To help them focus on the areas of interest to me, I provided them with a few neutral questions intended to probe their understanding of the prompts as well as their evaluation of whether and how the prompts might encourage critical thinking (see Appendix). Among these assignments was the one that had caused the friction noted above, and I directed their attention to that one first. Although my four-student discussion group did not have the advantage of the class context itself (certainly a significant factor), I was curious to see how these students, all of whom had demonstrated high competence in literacy skills, would infer their mission if they had to write on this topic, and how they would feel about it. Their reflections might then be compared with those of the history professor who conceived of the writing task, as well as with the thoughts of the English professor who disliked it. Here is the assignment:

Chronology: Umuofia (Achebe) [*Things Fall Apart*]; Declaration of Independence; Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen; Preamble to the U.S. Constitution; Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions; Communist Manifesto; British Imperialism (Achebe); U.N. Declaration of Human Rights;

Letter from Birmingham Jail; Preamble to the South African Constitution; [Robert Reich's] "Why the Rich Are Getting Richer, and Poor, Poorer."

Explain (1) where political power rests in the polities described or envisioned in these texts, and (2) from whence it derives its authority. (You may wish to cluster texts with relation to concepts of governance rather than treat each individually.) What does examining the texts chronologically reveal about the historical evolution of the concept of the body politic?

First, let's consider the history instructor's perspective. At the time of the interview, the course had been completed, and the professor, Geoff Purcell, recalled that only one student in the class had chosen this option from a menu of three topics. Questioned about the disagreement with his team-teacher, he minimized their differences and emphasized what he perceived as their common mission—to help students understand the concept of governance and its development over time. In his view, the assignment was unambiguous in requiring a "clustering" of texts to support an implied thesis—that ideas of how power should be distributed have "evolved," implying progress toward increasingly democratic modes of governance. In our interview, he offered the following reflections:

It looks like a fairly intimidating list, a dozen readings or more. The first thing we had to do was cluster them. Where do polities get the right to govern? Where do they derive that? So in the first reading, the [first part of the] Achebe reading [focused on the Ibo tribe in the late nineteenth century], power is derived from some sort of divine spirit presence coming into people who inhabit the world of the dead or the garments of the dead. Then the next few [texts] are all talking about the same thing, that you shouldn't be able to govern unless the people give you the right to govern. What was not settled is what constitutes the people, or as I said at the end of the [prompt], the body politic. Does the body politic constitute this group—white, male, propertied people? Does it constitute this group—white males? Does it constitute this group—white male and female, or even African-Americans in some way?.... Does it constitute all the people within what Martin Luther King, Jr., was saying—that it cannot be constrained by race, nor can it be constrained by gender. So it's this kind of expanding thing; so that's one cluster. Actually most of them get into that cluster. The two big exceptions would be *The Communist Manifesto* and the idea of imperialism, so the response would I hope complicate this notion of the body politic by looking at what Marx and Engels wanted in the *Communist Manifesto* and the realities of European imperialism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries—which, again, had within it the seeds of its destruction. These imperializing powers were saying we are ruling you by fiat, by our rights as white people, by whatever kind of mandate they claimed to have.

Although the advice to "cluster" texts might lead the student to seek groups of equal or nearly equal significance, it is clear from the teacher's reflections that he is seeking an argument for one main trend involving most of the texts in support of the implied thesis that governance has evolved toward democracy. He also hopes students will recognize that two of the texts embody ideas qualifying the overall trend: Marxism (as codified in *The Communist Manifesto*) and European imperialism (as represented in the second half of *Things Fall Apart*).

Now let us see what the four Honors students made of the assignment. The senior political science major, perhaps reflecting her training, saw this as an opportunity to reveal her knowledge and understanding of concepts of governance and the "structure of society" as they are reflected in individual texts:

Well, the question is asking you to really look at the structure of society in each [reading]. For example, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "Why the Rich Are Getting Richer and the Poor Are Getting Poorer," basically they're essays about who holds power in society and the essay's asking you to specifically describe who holds power and the reasons why and I think it's pretty self-explanatory. I don't think I would have a problem.

Nadine believes the reason for the inclusion of so many texts is to help students see different points of view on a "common theme," but she appears to seem satisfied with this multiplicity of perspective as an end in itself because it supplies "breadth of knowledge":

They want you to talk about the common theme of where political power rests in these different texts, but they want you to get a variety of opinions, that's why they're telling you to read so many of these essays. Basically all of them relate to one common theme but the teacher just wants you to get a breadth of knowledge from each different essay or article.

Of the four students, only one (Jon, the senior English major) noticed the need to group texts based on "related concepts rather than treating each individual text" and the need for a main idea to tie the clustered texts together in some coherent way: "it says what do the texts reveal about the historical evolution of the body politic." It seems, in

fact, that like the teacher, Jon sees his task as one of narrative, i.e., telling a highly abbreviated “story,” based on selected texts, of a particular kind of change over time: “... there’s a track that you can follow, you know, there’s connections you can make between one point and the point before it.” Although Jon sees the essay as a combination of “facts” and “interpretation,” he recognizes that that the writer is not being asked to shape an original or individual perspective on a theme:

It says what do the texts reveal about the historical evolution of the body politic. So I don’t think you can say something that’s too bizarre or really something that’s never been addressed before. I don’t think it allows itself too much for personal ingenuity. But at the same time there really isn’t one specific right answer because you’re trying to pinpoint the facts about a trend that’s to be interpreted from different perspectives.

It is worth noting that, despite Jon’s assumption that the main claim of the paper is open to critique (“a trend that’s to be interpreted from different perspectives”), the assignment does not suggest that the implied thesis (movement toward increased democracy) is open to interpretation or that the student should consider counter-arguments to his or her representation of the “evolution.” Moreover, students are not encouraged to consider exceptions to the trend, although Professor Purcell hopes they will specify two in particular as “complications.” Jon’s comment that “[the assignment] is asking you to make a revelation about a trend and in that sense I don’t think there can be too much deviance between a thesis on one extreme or a thesis on another” suggests his recognition that this is essentially a well-structured problem with a very narrow range of acceptable responses.

All of the students felt that having to address the question in only three to four pages would present a challenge. Nadine proposed as a solution to the problem of length “a lot of editing,” reflecting her interest in distilling the essence of each text down to its significance as a document of power relationships and implied social structures. Jon envisioned allocating space in his essay to each of three or four concepts rather than to individual texts:

I guess if you are able to group by concept then you would be OK because instead of thinking in terms of I have to attribute a certain fraction of the paper to each text, you’re thinking “I have to attribute a certain fraction of the paper to each of three or four different concepts,” which is much more doable to me I think.... It seems to me that’s what the real challenge of the assignment would be, is discerning what these concepts are.

Notably, neither of the freshmen either inferred what the “problem” was from the teacher’s point of view (as Jon did) or imposed a personal sense of what the assignment, holistically, was calling for (as Nadine did). Tony, perhaps intimidated by the seniors, said little, although he was receptive to their guidance. Adrian did not perceive the need for overarching connections, suggesting instead that, having perceived no implied thesis, she would consider each text individually and could imagine integrating them only in the most “general” way: “It’s more like discuss each thing and how it employs power and where the authority comes from more than maybe make assumptions on all of them.” She thought it would be impossible to have an overarching thesis “unless it was something really general” and so imagined she would “discuss each thing individually.” Clearly, this misses the point of the assignment, which is to elicit students’ understanding of a chain of events as developing over time. According to the professor, students should be able to “prove,” through a clustering of texts based on their understanding of a historical shift, a particular thesis:

That more and more people have laid claim to the right to have a say in governance. And what has happened over the past 200 years as reflected in these readings is that group after group who have been excluded have demanded to be included so there’s been a general trend in that direction. But it’s not a unilinear one. In fact you do see, for example, in the reading on imperialism where western powers that had been discussing and contesting the expansion of this right govern within their countries are now excluding those that they are governing in the colonies.... What I would have expected [from] the students after they’ve placed these readings chronologically, I’d have expected them to see a kind of broadening of the franchise as propertied people, man more generally (not just propertied men, but universal manhood suffrage), women— in the Western context you see this expansion of those who have a say in being governed. But then when these Western powers commence this imperial venture, then it kind of narrows and broadens again. So that might kind of trajectory I was looking for the students to understand. It appears that Jon, with his focus on grouping texts around concepts to argue for a trend, is the only one of the group who was able to “read the teacher,” i.e., infer, even out of context, the implied task from the wording of the assignment.

The English professor who was team-teaching the class, Joanne Clarke, was not surprised that only one student had chosen this comprehensive question from among the three options, and she even wondered about her own ability to address the topic effectively. She agreed with my speculation that the question requires much more knowledge and

disciplinary grounding than students at this level are likely to have, and added the following observation: “If you’re writing a three-to-four page essay [on this topic], it’s bound to be very superficial. I couldn’t write a short essay on this topic without making sweeping generalizations about evolution of governance.” This comment from a senior faculty member lends point to Adrian’s “naive” but insightful conclusion since that any thesis on this topic would have to be at a very general level, one shouldn’t try too hard to formulate one in so short an essay.

These differing perspectives reveal differences in levels of expertise, in disciplinary epistemologies, and in assumptions about what a good writing prompt in a freshman class should look like. The history professor acknowledged that this assignment is similar to an essay exam question he might give in a history class, and he emphasized that he aims to foster understanding, not memorization of quickly forgotten details:

I’m not so much interested in students coming up with correct answers as [in their] understanding of what happens over time in all of our history—and this is something, of course, that I think is exceptionally valuable about the interdisciplinary programs, like BHP [Baccalaureate Honors Program]—is that an understanding of history and, in the case of my course with Joanne, the literary perspectives are wonderful devices for opening students’ eyes both to literature, art, to ideas and also to the way ideas have evolved, the evolution of ideas. So basically my assignments are not looking for right answers; they’re looking for students to think historically.

However, it is clear from his earlier comments that the essay assignment on governance does have, in a sense, a right answer, as Jon intuited. Moreover, as his English professor team-teacher knew, it would be difficult to “cover” all these texts in three or four pages except by using abstracted and simplified aspects of them to illustrate the truth of the correct answer. The history professor could make the case persuasively because of the expert historical background he brings to the analysis of these texts. He attributes his team-teacher’s reservations about the assignment to her abundance of knowledge, arguing (half jokingly) that she is too smart to do what he wants the freshmen to do:

[Author]: What were Joanne’s reservations about this assignment as you understand them?

Purcell: She thought it was too ambitious, that it would be very difficult to write a three- or four- page paper on this and I agree entirely that for Joanne it would be very difficult. But for a freshman student trying to deal with the basic principles that we were covering in this unit, I think it would be less difficult for that sort of student.

[Author]: Because Joanne knows a lot.

Purcell (with humor): Because Joanne’s much smarter than I am and, of course, I could do it in three pages.

[Author]: Well you could do it in three pages, in a sense, because you have a vision of what it should look like in three pages.

Purcell: Yes. It was a unit designed for a freshman Great Ideas course. Obviously this is something that you could write a major treatise on governance on, but that wasn’t the intention. The intention was to get the students to understand how people get the right to govern, from whence they derive that right, and how that has changed over the past two hundred years.

This final comment reflects Professor Purcell’s sense of the assignment as being fundamentally well-structured. That is, the history professor wants his students to address the texts as illustrative of a given historical process—not to analyze them as complex arguments in themselves, but to mine them for evidence that can be used to illustrate a specified trend over time. But the nature of the problem is far less apparent to students, who, as novices, have not done what the professor has, i.e., processed the underlying ill-structured (i.e., non-formulaic) elements so as to see each text as manifesting part of a coherent “story.” Because an understanding of this story is both an assumption behind the prompt and the anticipated response to it, we can understand how students might be confused by it. The professor, in contrast, can imagine a distillation of a series of complex texts to illustrate a historical trend because his breadth and depth of knowledge are tacitly in the background, reinforcing connections and allowing him to downplay counterarguments that he might otherwise choose to include. It is a task he would feel comfortable doing because of (not, as he implies, in spite of) his expertise. The coherence of the essay he imagines arises from this expertise and is unlikely to emerge without it. Professor Clarke, partly because she is not a historian and was therefore closer, in a sense, to the students’ perspective, intuited both the debatable assumption in the implied thesis and the level of knowledge required to argue the point persuasively: “They really have to construct a timeline or— this isn’t a timeline for them essentially— but there is a tacit assumption, that there is an evolutionary process

toward better and better government, which I have a little trouble with in a lot of ways. And they just have to know a tremendous amount to do this.”

From Practice to Theory: Experts and Novices

Support for the inference that the assignment actually demands a good deal of contextual knowledge is offered by experts in learning theory. In a study of how knowledge affects writing and recall of information, psychologist James F. Voss and his colleagues compared how individuals with little knowledge of baseball recorded and later recalled events that transpired during a half inning of the game. High-knowledge people were better than those with less knowledge at recalling texts produced by other high-knowledge individuals, presumably because their backgrounds allowed them to make sense of details and sequences that might seem puzzling or incoherent to others; that is, they could connect the narratives to familiar ideas and thus recall them more readily. In addition, the compositions of the more knowledgeable people were both longer and more logically consistent:

...the texts written by high knowledge individuals provided a coherent account of the half-inning of the game with the action of the game readily depicting how the game moved from one state to the next. Moreover, comments made by the high knowledge individuals while generating the texts suggested that their major problem was selection; they could include many facets of a baseball account and needed to select what should be included. On the other hand, the text of the low knowledge individuals was quite choppy, listing successive game states, but usually not providing for state transitions or being consistent and accurate in the account. (81)

It appears that the deeper understanding of the more expert observers caused them to notice more and allowed them to “select what should be included” on the basis of a tacit understanding of what a coherent narrative of the half-inning should look like. Without this understanding, the less expert individuals produced a report of “successive game states” that remained unintegrated with each other, a failure of narrative coherence that produced not only a “choppy” style but also a summary perceived to be less accurate. These qualities suggest the thinking that Nadine and Adrian displayed in response to the governance assignment: just as the novice baseball observers could describe discrete plays but had no repertoire of game contexts to help them interpret these events as part of a bigger picture, the students found it difficult to imagine connecting the texts to form a coherent account that would tell a historical “story” of increasing democratization.

It is true that the students were, unlike the game observers, assumed to have digested a particular story line; in this case, it was based on the teacher’s understanding of expanded enfranchisement. However, as indicated above, students do not necessarily grasp what the overall mission is, focusing instead on reproducing knowledge of individual texts, and, without an expert sense of how parts (not only the texts, but the “concepts” under which they are to be grouped) relate to whole (the overall “plot line” of the implied thesis), they will inevitably disappoint the teacher’s expectations. Specialists in the freshman-year experience emphasize the importance of recognizing the stages of intellectual maturation (as outlined, for example, in William Perry’s influential study of Harvard students in the 1960’s) when faculty members imagine students’ responses to an assignment:

When freshmen confront even a highly structured problem, they do not always distinguish what is given in the question from what is being asked.... Thus, highlighting problem-solving techniques and procedures might include addressing questions such as the following: What is given in the question? What are you being asked to do? What concepts or ideas are you asked to bring to bear? What steps will you need to take? (Enckson and Strommer 74-75)

To a recently minted Ph.D. or an experienced scholar, such questions are so embedded in normal intellectual activity as to seem transparent. But to most freshmen, questions of this kind must be made explicit as a method of socialization not only into prevailing academic habits but also into the highly specialized discourse community of a particular classroom.

Related research suggests that the complex moves required to relate parts to a whole are considered essential to learning theory. In studies of expert vs. novice problem-solving, cognitive scientists have noted the importance of patterns, “big ideas,” or conceptual understanding in enabling effective solutions: the knowledge of experts “is organized around core concepts or ‘big ideas’ that guide their thinking about their domains” [*How People Learn* 24]. By recognizing the holistic nature of deep learning, we can better understand the results of Voss’s study and its implications for teaching. Because the more expert game observers had to be selective, each of them presumably had an implicit principle of selection that resulted in a particular account, not identical with those of other experts. But the principle could only have resulted from their prior experience and their resulting knowledge as sports fans.

This experience allowed them to move back and forth between events in the game and the larger patterns of which such events are typically a part. Similarly, in a study of successful professional practitioners, Donald Schon has observed a constant movement between the particular and the larger vision or pattern that provides a “frame” for discrete components (whether individual texts, as in the assignment or “game states” as in the baseball study). He quotes, for example, a master architect who supervises students in a design studio: “The principle is that you work simultaneously from the unit and from the total and then go in cycles” (45). Schon’s description of problem-solving in professional practice resonates with the responses of students to the governance assignment (i.e., their tendency to overlook the evolutionary trend in favor of discrete parts) as well as with the accounts provided by Voss’s “low-knowledge” group:

Designing is a holistic skill. In an important sense, one must grasp it as a whole in order to grasp it at all. Therefore, one cannot learn it in a molecular way, by learning first to carry out smaller units of activity and then to string those units together in a whole design process; for the pieces tend to interact with one another and to derive their meanings and characters from the whole process in which they are embedded. (158).

The students in our case were insufficiently initiated into “the total” to perform this process well. Thus, the chronology of the texts, critical in the professor’s vision because it underlies the assumption of a historical evolution on which the assignment depends, is mentioned by none of the students.

Scholars of cognition suggest that “novices might benefit from models of how experts approach problem solving—especially if they then receive coaching in using similar strategies” (*How People Learn* 30). In this case, the one young man who selected the difficult governance topic did receive substantial coaching from his professors as he drafted a response to the assignment. “In the preparatory meeting, where the students worked with each other in small groups discussing how they would approach these questions, the two instructors worked with the single student who picked this question to give him some guidance on where he might go with it, because it’s so comprehensive and so difficult” [Clarke interview]. It may well be that this tutoring offered the student a helpful model of how historians create coherent and convincing narratives through the selection and interpretation of textual evidence. That such intensive guidance was necessary is an indication of the hidden demands of the assignment. Clearly, students would benefit from faculty members’ awareness that “expertise can sometimes hurt teaching because many experts forget what is easy and what is difficult for students” [*How People Learn* 32].

Implied in the tacit assumptions made by experts are the specialized qualities of discipline-grounded approaches that inform professional thinking. Thus, in the disputed governance assignment we can see the lines of the historian’s craft rather than those of the English professor. While students, as we have seen, tend to miss the cues in the assignment that might allow them to at least approximate the trajectory of the history professor’s imagined response, they are discouraged from seeking the dialogic qualities that might inhere in individual texts—qualities that are more likely to be foregrounded by a professor with a background in literary theory. For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, the missionary movement that dominates the second half of the book does tragically destroy the indigenous culture, but it succeeds partly because it offers a kind of enfranchisement denied to those classes of Ibo people deemed outcasts by their fellows. The terms of the assignment do not invite students to acknowledge this social reality (which Achebe explicitly portrays) nor the heteroglossic implications of the subtly shifting narrative voice, although these are certainly relevant to the reader’s evaluation of power relationships in the text and therefore to the implied thesis of the assignment.

Nor are students encouraged to consider how a text might, from a particular perspective, yield evidence both in support of and in opposition to the given “trend” of increased enfranchisement, depending on one’s framework for interpretation and evaluation. For example, a comparison of the Ibo justice system with that of the British, both of which have some elements that elicit approval from the reader and some that repel, complicates considerably the idea of “evolution” in the body politic. Choosing not to draw students into this sort of complexity, the history professor envisions a best way to “cluster” texts that support the rule of evolution toward broader enfranchisement and identifies exceptions to the general trend, which he also expects students to note. Moreover, the attribution of “exceptional” status to selected texts is also based on an arguable paradigm that necessarily mutes certain complications. For example, couldn’t a student have reasonably argued that the theory behind *The Communist Manifesto*, rather than constituting a qualification of the general tendency, is in fact consonant with mid-nineteenth century revolutionary movements throughout Europe and the U.S. and thus part of the movement toward a broader franchise? In raising these points, I do not mean to suggest that the history professor’s assignment was inadequate or ineffective *per se*; indeed, it seems that his purposes are rooted in a deep conviction that he is obliged, as an expert historian and a dedicated teacher, to help notoriously ahistorical college freshmen develop an awareness of essential global trends. Rather, I wish to illustrate the kinds of disciplinary thinking and unspoken assumptions that underlie the genesis of many writing prompts, assumptions that need to be unpacked if students are to respond in

the expected ways.

In fact, one of the other options for this assignment required one of these alternate (dialogic) emphases, i.e., a focus on competing concepts of governance both within and between individual texts. Thus, in choosing a topic, a student would also be choosing an implicit approach to textual analysis, although it would be unrealistic to expect all but the most intellectually sophisticated to recognize the differing demands. Perhaps that is one reason why this second topic, selected by all the students except the one who braved the evolution-of-governance question, did not produce heartening results. Here is the prompt:

Select TWO texts from the following list: Declaration of Independence; Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions [Stanton and Mott, Seneca Falls Declaration]; The Preamble to the Constitution of South Africa; King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"; Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

Then, a) Explain the clash of concepts of governance at the center of each of your selected texts. What concepts do the authors advocate? What concepts are they arguing against, explicitly or implicitly? And, b) Compare the rhetorical strategies used by the authors to persuade their audiences.

Despite its relative appeal to students, this assignment failed to elicit the kinds of coherent arguments the professors anticipated. Instead, the essays looked more like clumps of disjointed answers to exam questions. In an interview with me, Dr. Clarke pondered the disappointing responses. Apparently wondering whether students had had sufficient opportunities to practice the skills demanded by the question, she first noted how the class had been prepared for the clash-of-concepts topic by prior exercises, such as an assignment on how Shakespeare evokes readers' sympathies for particular political perspectives in *Richard II* and a discussion of rhetorical techniques in the Declaration of Independence and in "Letter from Birmingham Jail." She concluded that flaws in the design of this assignment had invited a fragmented test-question sort of answer rather than the unified thesis-driven essays she and her team-teacher had hoped for.

Clarke: What went wrong was putting the pieces together in a coherent argument, because if you look at it they were asked to do two texts and they tended to run through text one AB, text two AB and it didn't cohere as a very interesting kind of argument. Although many of the local points worked fine, I wouldn't construct the question that way again and expect an integrated essay.

[Author]: You said that this was a sort of compromise question.

Clarke: It was. We had asked the students to make suggestions about what they would like to write about for their final take-home exam essay, which is what this is, and this is as close as we came to what they were asking to do. So in a sense, they lacked experience in writing a coherent subject [i.e., assignment prompt], but that doesn't absolve us of responsibility for not shaping it beyond that.

[Author]: I guess one would expect a senior-level English major who was pretty competent to write an essay that had a kind of coherence that you did not find among these freshmen.

Clarke: Nor did we ask for it. If you read the task it never says integrate the two texts in any way....

To this I would add that a comparison between rhetorical strategies, the last task in the prompt, is a very high-level skill indeed, one that might be practiced in an advanced writing class geared toward English majors. It is not, after all, so surprising that freshmen, to whom the very concept of "rhetorical strategy" is likely to seem alien and rather technical, might try to dodge this part of the assignment, which did in fact explicitly invite the synthesis that Professor Clarke blames herself for not specifying.

A third option—one that Dr. Clarke "loved," but that nobody selected—asked students to choose three texts and show how they might illuminate the issues in a NY Times article on globalization—a far less highly structured problem than either of the others:

Using at least three texts from our Concepts of Governance unit (readings from the Declaration of Independence to Reich), explain how these texts deepen and complicate your understanding of the *New York Times* article which we handed out on Tuesday (Steven Greenhouse, "Critics Calling U.S. Supplier in Nicaragua a 'Sweatshop'"). In light of your selected texts, what do you conclude about the issues Greenhouse raises?

I agreed with Dr. Clarke that of the three options, this is the best designed because, while extremely clear, it does not lend itself to predictable, formulaic, or reductive answers. It requires evidence of understanding of the primary

texts, along with application to a third, contemporary text focused on a current problem, thus fostering an awareness of the living nature of some very old ideas. Indeed, it seems to require, more than the other prompts, a combination of the higher order thinking skills that professors would like students to have practiced by the time they get to upper-level courses. Maybe these are the very reasons students rejected it:

Clarke: See, I loved [the question involving the *NY Times* article] because it is integrated and it does ask them to understand the texts and bring them to bear on a problem, which had to do with the impact of globalization, and they didn't like that one.

[Author]: That was the one where they had to use three texts and explain how they would help them to read the New York Times article, which had to do with...?

Clarke: Capitalist exploitation, basically. It was coming out of Marx. It was coming out of reading Robert Reich : "Why the Rich Are Getting Richer and the Poor, Poorer." And there were other texts that they could apply~[the theme of] social justice out of Martin Luther King. We had indeed begun discussion in class that would have led directly to this [assignment].

[Author]: It's fascinating to me that nobody picked that, because it seems a whole lot easier in some ways.

Clarke: It does. Especially since we had discussed the article and it was so clearly related to the readings.

[Author]: Do you imagine that perhaps the only reason they chose the clash-of-concepts topic rather than this one is that this one says: Use at least three texts and apply it to a fourth one, whereas the other says: Select two texts. And so on the surface the other one seems easier; I only have to talk about two things. Whereas if I do this one I have to talk about four things. It's twice as hard.

Clarke: Right. I don't know. That's an interesting hypothesis.

From Dr. Clarke's comments, and her students' responses, we might speculate on how construction of writing prompts affects students' choices and their perception of the "problem" to be solved by a particular essay. If there is a "correct" response (as in the history professor's assignment), the student must infer this and figure out how to marshal evidence for the implied thesis. In the evolution-of-governance question, even the organization is implied—it is chronological. Nonetheless this option was rejected by the vast majority, probably because they had transformed it into a version of the sort of assignment they had been trained to do in high school—show "proof of their understanding of individual texts. And in this case, the number seemed overwhelming because students appeared to miss or (or to ignore because it is difficult?) the instructor's advice to cluster the texts conceptually. In the light of what we know from Perry and others about forms and levels of development, it is perhaps not surprising that students preferred the prompt that seemed not only to call for a clear, well-structured response (Discuss a , then discuss b , where a and b are quite well defined) but also required attention to the fewest texts (two, as opposed to 4 or 10!). Ironically, it seems that the qualities perceived by Professor Clarke as flaws in the design of the clash-of-concepts topic (the invitation to a piecemeal approach) are the very qualities that attracted students. Also worth noting is that students may have felt more emotionally invested in this question since they had played a role in developing it.

While I share Dr. Clarke's preference for the prompt involving the newspaper article, I can see more clearly in retrospect why freshmen would be reluctant to address a "how" question rather than a "what" question, especially when the process that must be articulated is one of "deepening" and "complicating." One feels obliged, then, to consider how to make this worthwhile challenge a bit more user-friendly. (For example, would students have felt better able to tackle this problem if they had been asked to show how two or three selected texts *might help a "typical" newspaper reader to understand the issues* in the Greenhouse article? The task remains essentially the same, but this language places the student in position of "teacher" with a specified audience.) In any case, of the three topics this one probably does most to foster the kind of independent connection-making and thesis-writing that professors hope students will later be able to do. The larger point is that different assignments, even different options for the same paper, require very different ways of thinking and sets of rhetorical strategies depending on the tacit assumptions embedded within them. Unless these differences are made explicit, students will have to muddle through by trial and error in each class, perhaps concluding that there is simply no way to please every teacher because each of them wants a demonstration of some specific set of skills, but it's impossible to know which ones are wanted at any given moment. They would have a point.

What's the Problem?

It seems clear that much of the divergence between the two professors in this case is rooted in disciplinary differences that remained unarticulated. English teachers do not typically use literary texts such as novels primarily as a means of illustrating historical trends or principles. On the other hand, they are likely, particularly in writing classes, to emphasize thematic connections that defy chronology. In our interview, Professor Purcell said he saw little difference between his role as a history professor in BHP 100 and his role in a History class; in either case, his job, as he sees it, is to teach students to “think historically.” Professor Clarke saw things differently; she herself put much less emphasis on disciplinary distinctions and did not perceive that her team-teacher did not share this perspective:

We very seldom make the separate disciplines obvious to the students. That is, we do not exchange lecture days or give discipline-specific lectures often. Occasionally, if I'm speaking about the structure of a Shakespeare play, I will be an English teacher. You have a diagram that my colleague provided talking about how historians work. That's rare. Usually we both participate in dialogue with the students about the work from whatever perspective. I don't know whether that's easier for them or harder for them that we don't separate out the strands of the discipline.

Professor Purcell, in contrast, was careful to privilege historical thinking over literary analysis:

[Author]: In your work with Joanne have you come to the conclusion that thinking historically is similar to thinking literarily, if there is such an adverb?

Purcell: I don't think so. I think good academics of all sorts cannot ignore chronology. It has to matter that people came before other people; that intellectual schools developed over time; that people were inspired by their antecedents.

[Author]: Well, what about assignments that ask students to sort of meld things in a creative way—creative, using the term loosely- for example, look at Thoreau's “Civil Disobedience,” maybe use it as a lens through which to view *Antigone*. Is that a problem for you because it seems ahistorical? (You have ancient Greece, 19th century United States.) Or do you think there could be value in something like that?

Purcell: I don't know. I'd have to think about that. That's not quite what I expected to be asked at this point. I don't know actually, but I'd have to.... There's lots of ways of looking creatively at the intellectual world, I would imagine. But they cannot do an injustice to history.

It is not surprising that a history professor would insist on looking at intellectual problems through the lens of historical analysis. However, students need to know that such an orientation is shaped by disciplinary assumptions about what counts as knowledge and understanding. Much of current historical theory treats the assemblage of data more as argument than as proof (thus implying a range of counter-arguments), and the professor's approach is therefore one among other possible others. Included in these others are some he would no doubt eschew because, in backgrounding chronology to favor a thematic synchrony across time periods, they “do an injustice to history.” To ask students to consider, for example, how Sophocles' portrayal of *Antigone* manifests Thoreauvian principles is certainly ahistorical in its disregard for chronology but nonetheless requires critical application of a theory to a particular instance in a specific historical context. I do not think it is coincidental that the latter assignment was crafted by a composition instructor, a doctoral candidate in English, who made the following observations on its value:

I want students to be able to forge connections between works, because life is never so simple as to offer you one point of view, one right answer, one way of looking at things and then allow you to take it for what it's worth. We're always being confronted with multiple points of view and I see part of the responsibility of the composition classroom is to make students acknowledge that there are multiple ways of thinking about things. And, secondly, to recognize their responsibility in deciding where they stand with regard to those multiple points of view. And I don't think you can do that necessarily so easily with one text.... [For example], civil disobedience in Sophocles' *Antigone* civil disobedience by nineteenth-century American writer Thoreau. The idea is the same, the approach is very similar but in many cases if they were asked to write about civil disobedience, unless they were required to look at them together, they wouldn't necessarily have a more nuanced reaction to the issue. Is it a viable way of responding to what they consider to be social injustice? Is there ever a wrong way or a wrong reason to practice civil disobedience? And, you can't necessarily answer that with looking at one instance. So,

that is why I ask them to bring the multiple texts together. Plus, it's a really good exercise in critical thinking. It really makes them try to figure out, well exactly how does this relate to that, and are they always similar or are they different? Where do they differ? So it's a rich, rewarding experience—when they can do it and when they can realize that they are doing it.

Obviously, disciplinary training conditions our expectations of what a good question looks like as well as the kinds of knowledge and thinking that students need to demonstrate. Just as the history professor feels comfortable using (an English professor might say, simplifying) literary texts to illustrate historical trajectories, the English professor collapses what historians might consider essential distinctions between texts in order to have students ponder enduring questions that have informed the examined life for millennia, linking authors from vastly different social and political contexts. Both tasks, it should be noted, require a particular sort of abstraction, each in the service of a certain kind of connection-making that depends on specific habits of thought. However, it is easy for experts to overlook the long and messy processes by which they came to understand what it means to “do” their field, and to expect students to imitate only the end result of a long period of study without undergoing the thought processes that inform practice in the discipline.

While foregrounding the distinct epistemologies that underlie inquiry in diverse disciplines seems not to play a central role in the revision of freshman composition programs taught by instructors across the curriculum, the practical effects of these distinctions have been the subject of some revealing research. In the field of history, for example, a comparison between expert and novice practices in evaluating the reliability of verbal and visual documents offers compelling evidence that disciplinary understanding is more essentially a “how” than a “what”—what Samuel S. Wineburg has called “the disciplinary equivalent of a compass,” e.g. “knowledge of how to establish warrant and determine the validity of competing truth claims in a discipline” (84). Especially relevant to the argument here are considerations of problem-construction and problem-solving in different fields. (I am not speaking here of the writing-to-learn exercises that WAC programs have promoted so successfully but rather the assumptions underlying what it means to “learn to write,” i.e., the presumed mission of freshman composition classes, including writing-intensive freshman seminars.) Susan Peck MacDonald, for example, has persuasively illustrated how professors trained to write about literature will formulate tasks that are strikingly different—not just in discourse conventions, but in fundamental assumptions about what counts as knowledge and as argument—from those constructed by scientists and social scientists. She concludes that while scientists construct and research problems that are “publicly discernible, finite in number, communally worked upon, and generalizable,” those addressed by English professors typically do not have any of these qualities (323). MacDonald points out that literary interpretations, unlike scientific research, privilege the uniqueness and unresolvability of the “data” being studied, i.e., the text. And she notes the relatively “undefined” and “game-like” nature of literary problems, observing that much of what is rewarded in literary studies is the creativity of inventing a problem no one else has thought of and the ability to argue persuasively for a solution without assuming that the “problematics in texts” can ever be “put to rest” (323). The contrast with approaches to problem-solving in science, including social science—in which studies are generally intended to provide definitive answers to questions researched via well-established and universally accepted methods—is quite clear.

This contrast is further illuminated by Michael Carter’s distinction between problems that are based on “information-processing” (more associated with math and science) and those that are “epistemic” (more associated with the humanities). The differences lie mostly in the definitiveness of the solution and the flexibility of the solution protocol.

...information- processing problems are goal oriented, and epistemic problems are oriented toward the incongruity that generates the problem. For instance, an algebra problem has very specific constraints on its solution and thus on the process of achieving that solution; but the problem of the influence of Josquin de Prez on other Renaissance composers has fewer constraints and thus more room for finding a solution and for disagreeing about solutions. (559)

In locating his problem-solving definitions in what amount to disciplinary distinctions, Carter reminds us of the distinct epistemological theories that generate all inquiry. And he emphasizes the social and communal contexts of the process: “Constructing a writing problem is an interpretive act that takes place within a discourse community. Thus, what constitutes a problem and how that problem is ‘solved’ are both functions of the conventions of a community” (563).

Writing in the mid-1980’s, Carter and MacDonald probably assumed that composition would continue be taught exclusively by English instructors. MacDonald counseled such instructors to think about the “unrepresentative” nature of their writing assignments and warned that WAC programs “need to be aware of provincial attitudes about writing—of privileging individualistic and innovative kinds of problem definition that occur in writing about literary subjects” (329). Today, I would argue, the need for such awareness is greater than ever, and it is complicated by the

increasing imperative for disciplinary reciprocity: As instructors are recruited from across the curriculum to teach writing, they will have to consider what sorts of problem-posing and problem-solving their writing assignments require of students and how these demands differ from those arising from other fields of inquiry. And they will need to think more intentionally about how practice in these exercises will enable students to produce what will be expected later in their academic careers.

Focusing on such questions is, however, counter to the traditional imperatives of the academy, where disciplinary epistemologies, the foundation of university structures, are generally transparent, i.e., so embedded in the practice of the discipline as to be unavailable as a subject of instruction. In a curricular history of writing in the academy, David R. Russell clarifies trends that explain why reorganizing the structure of freshman writing programs to include experts from across the curriculum requires a profound shift in faculty consciousness. At the very least, they will need to acknowledge the rhetorical and conventional nature of communication even in the most “objective” kinds of communication:

Disciplines never acquired a conscious knowledge of the rhetorical conventions they used daily and expected their students to use, for these conventions were so bound up with the activity of the discipline and were acquired so subtly in the learning of the discipline itself that they were rarely thought of as writing instruction.... At the curricular level, if professionals are not aware of the role rhetoric plays in their own discipline, then they will see little need to teach it. (16-17)

Can We Talk?

The kind of reflection needed to overcome this transparency is difficult to do in isolation, but it can be facilitated dramatically by focused cross-curricular conversation. Faculty-development opportunities for sharing assignments and analyzing the epistemological assumptions behind them have proven transformative in helping instructors to think about the usually tacit relationship between teaching strategies and learning outcomes. The potential impact of such consciousness-raising for faculty is illustrated by another mini-debate between teachers in a freshman seminar, this one from a course team-taught by an English professor and a political science professor. As suggested both in the English/history case analysis and in the summary of related cognitive research above, a difference in approach that is likely to emerge when English professors collaborate with faculty from other disciplines is between asking students to illustrate a given idea or principle and asking them to argue for a relationship that they themselves have discovered. In crafting an assignment with an implied “answer,” the professor, trying to move students in a particular direction (i.e., toward a truth—perhaps provisional—that he or she has arrived at through expert practices, such as Purcell’s understanding of historical shifts in power distribution), might ask leading questions that foreclose potential exploratory moves. In the assignment below, the bold-faced questions were added by the professor of political science, John Seligman, to an assignment drafted by the English professor.

In *The Prince* (1513), Machiavelli gives advice on how a political leader should conduct himself to maintain order as well as his own position. He says he wants to write something “useful” and that he wished to “follow the real truth of things [rather] than an imaginary view of them.” Write a paper of 3-4 pages in which you consider how Machiavelli’s philosophy, as set forth in the excerpt you read from *The Prince*, is an implicit response to Plato’s ideas of proper governance as set forth in “Allegory of the Cave.” Ideas to consider: What do the two theories say about how individuals can, and should, perceive reality? What is the obligation of a leader to the people regarding their understanding of reality? Why is Machiavelli often considered anti-Platonic in his views of politics and knowledge? Be sure to cite textual evidence to support your assertions, including the page number(s) in parentheses following the quotation or citation.

The political scientist expects that the first two of the bold-faced questions will lead students to the evidence that will support the presumption of “anti-Platonism” in the third question. But the English professor chafes at the added constraint of an implied thesis. Without the leading questions, she argues, the writer would need to take more responsibility in making a case for the relationship between the two authors in question. Although it is certainly true that Platonic Idealism is inimical to Machiavelli’s pragmatic advice to the leader whose primary mission is to retain power, students might benefit, she thinks, from arriving at this distinction on their own rather than being handed it. Moreover, the wording of the revised prompt, according to the English professor, discourages thinking about possible parallels in the theories of these two very different figures. One might argue, she claims, that “Machiavelli, despite his striking differences from Plato, does share his elitist outlook, grounded in a low estimate of the intellectual abilities and aspirations of the ordinary individual.”

In a videotaped faculty discussion on designing writing assignments, Professor Seligman began to consider some distinctions he wanted to make in his own pedagogic practice between courses in which questions generally have a single correct answer (e.g., *Methods of Political Analysis*, which requires the application of a particular method to a particular problem) and courses, such as BHP 100, that offer the student more freedom to argue from a variety of perspectives:

One of the phrases I hate the most is when students will say, “I didn’t know what you wanted.” I mean, I’m teaching *Methods of Political Analysis*, and the student will say to me, “I didn’t know what you wanted,” and I feel I have to say, “I wanted the right answer.” In *Methods*, there really is a right answer. “No you can’t use that statistic with this thing, that’s what I wanted, OK? I wanted you to use the right one.” Aside from that, obviously in the other areas in which we work, I wonder, maybe it is a problem sometimes. What makes this so difficult is that there are things that we consider to be self-evident and when we’re designing questions that perhaps aren’t self-evident, for instance, going back to the Machiavelli question where I said in what ways is Machiavelli anti-Platonic? Now, in my experience and my training that’s such a self-evident question. There’s no way you could say, well Machiavelli is really a Platonist. But I guess you always have to catch yourself and say, wait a minute, do I really want to lead [students] in that direction or (1) do I want them to discover that direction themselves or (2) do I even want them to perhaps think about it in such a way that maybe they’ll start to find linkages between Plato and Machiavelli. Again, as I’ve said, when I think of all the training that I’ve had obviously the first thing I think of is OK show us where he’s an anti-Platonist and again I think we have to worry about that aspect of what is self-evident.

Here we see a revealing reflection on how our pedagogy may be conditioned, in ways we are not aware of, by disciplinary expertise—what Seligman calls “my experience” and “all of the training that I’ve had,” which leads him to an “obvious” writing prompt intended to elicit a standard comparison/contrast. In considering that students might be better off “discovering” the point instead of simply illustrating it or even finding a counter-argument—“linkages between Plato and Machiavelli”—to the standard wisdom, the professor illuminates the unspoken assumptions about teaching (and even, perhaps, about the relationship between Plato and Machiavelli) that he is now willing to rethink. Of course, he might conclude after all that asking students to define important differences between Plato and Machiavelli is essential to his purposes in this class—or that they need to focus on salient differences before they write a more complex comparison encompassing similarities as well. Whatever his conclusion, I suspect that this sort of self-analysis is a rare move for an experienced professor; not many of us feel very comfortable confronting the complex and indeterminate nature of our teaching role and even less so rethinking fundamental verities in our discipline. This is an instance of what Pat Hutchings and Lee Shulman of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching call “going meta” (13), that is, thinking about our thinking to reveal the assumptions that underlie ideas, principles, and approaches that, by virtue of our training and experience have become so natural to us that they seem like common sense. Unmasking these assumptions helps to us clarify for ourselves—and, ideally, for our students—the theories and philosophies that shape our interpretations and presentation of material.

As topic-based courses taught by faculty outside of English departments become more widespread, the idea (often conveyed to graduate students in English) that writing well can be taught generically—through rhetoric texts or other systematic methods—will continue to be questioned. After all, weren’t these older methods ineffective in addressing the problems we are now confronting (Russell, Introduction; Bogel and Gottschalk, ch. 1)? But what philosophy of writing pedagogy will take their place? And what sorts of training, if any, should writing instructors undergo? According to the Chronicle article, among the qualifications of those hired to replace the English Department graduate students at universities such as Columbia, Duke, and Princeton are an earned doctorate and “some experience teaching writing” (A40). I don’t doubt that there are opportunities and in some cases requirements for faculty development. But have we given enough thought to the theoretical basis from which the recommended practices are derived? Or the degree to which our practices really do manifest the theories (pedagogic and disciplinary) we embrace? Shulman has observed that most campus teaching and learning centers mute the importance of disciplinary differences when addressing instructional practices, instead conveying the misleading message “that teaching is generic, technical, and a matter of performance; that it’s not part of the community that means so much to faculty, the disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, or professional community. It’s something you lay on top of what you *really* do as a scholar in a discipline” (6). And, I would add, when the focus of the course is a skill—writing—rather than the practice of one’s own discipline, important differences among approaches are likely to be even more overlooked.

Russell’s analysis offers insight into why this is so, pointing to the endemic tension in industrialized nations between “equity” and “excellence,” the often conflicting roles of education as equalizer of opportunity and as preparation of the best and the brightest to be the most productive members within a specialized field. Since professors’ expertise in discourse conventions is acquired unconsciously through their disciplinary training, they tend to view a need to focus

on such matters as remedial and have been happy to leave this sort of instruction to English departments. In doing so, they continue to teach as they have been taught and are in fact encouraged to do so in the name of maintaining standards and fostering excellence (26-28). Not only is time focused on unmasking how transparent epistemologies intersect with discourse conventions considered a sacrifice to the “real” subject matter of the discipline, but it may even be seen as inimical to the interests of the field: “[C]onsciously translating the discipline’s rhetorical universe into language that students at lower levels could understand may be seen as trivializing or watering down the very knowledge the discipline is charged with upholding.... [U]nless spurred by external pressures, disciplines have not found it necessary to examine, much less improve, the way students are initiated into their respective symbolic universes” (29-30).

Although instructors in freshman writing courses are not typically expected to teach discipline-specific genres such as lab reports or technical abstracts, they are enjoined to develop their writing prompts from meaningful and focused subject matter that grows out of their own training and interests. (Attempts to focus on writing *per se* with no foundation in assigned readings are likely to backfire [Erikson and Strommer 74]; *the Chronicle* article reports the failure of one such experiment at Columbia because “the students didn’t have anything to write about” [Bartlett A40]). While the new programs emphasize the particular subject matter of specific fields (e.g., by encouraging students to choose writing seminars based on themes or areas of inquiry in which they have a special interest), the apparent assumption is that the skills comprised in the general concept of “writing well” will not vary much from discipline to discipline or even from class to class. Or perhaps the assumption is that such differences are not essential to the pedagogic enterprise. Certainly we can easily list qualities—such as logical development, grammatical correctness, and effective use of evidence—that are generally applicable to writing in any field. But how useful, in practice, is such a list? As the examples above are intended to illustrate, even subtle differences in interpretation of the mission to “teach writing” rooted in disciplinary knowledge—as all authentic writing inevitably is—can have dramatic consequences for students. The idea is not necessarily for programs to strive for uniformity across the curriculum in writing pedagogy, but for faculty members to make explicit—to themselves and to their students—the usually unarticulated theories that underlie their practices.

Professor Seligman’s reflection on “what is self-evident” in his discipline is an example of the sort of meta-cognition that is likely to have a direct effect on teaching. In contemplating his original impulse to direct students toward a particular “correct” response in the Plato/Machiavelli assignment, he noted the need to search for a middle way between the extremes of too much prescription and too little guidance. Recalling his own career as a student, he worried about assignments that err on the side of openness, offering no fruitful way into the material—or are so ill-defined as to intimidate the student, who has no parameters at all for shaping a coherent response. His empathy with students shines through his own recollections of being a graduate student confronted with such an assignment:

The one thing I think we have to be careful about...is that we don’t want to kind of deconstruct the question to the point where we’re just saying here’s the topic, just putting down on the paper: Plato and Machiavelli. That’s it, you know, do something with it.... I remember one time when I was in graduate school we were reading Hume. The paper assignment was write something about Hume and the passions. There was absolutely no guidance there. [I wondered:] Where am I supposed to go, what angle am I supposed to take on this?

The professor’s point is instructive. Assignments that simply name a topic and ask the student to “discuss” are, at least for the vast majority of undergraduates, less like what critical thinking-theorists admire as good “ill-structured.” i.e.. non-formulaic or, to use Carter’s terms, “epistemic” problems (Petraglia 39, Brown 10, Yoss 70-77, Carter 557-58) than they are non-problems. In such cases, it is up to the student to construct the problem parameters entirely, a task whose value is diminished by its inauthenticity—that is, in life, we don’t generally strive to *create* problems out of topics. The need to balance guidance and freedom is well articulated by MacDonald, who advocates “an initial restraint that allows the reader to move toward new meaning”; such a “constraint,” in terms of the assignment above, might be the instruction to consider Platonic ideas of effective leadership through the eyes of Machiavelli. The (usually less desirable) alternatives, according to McDonald, are “either an initial constraint that forces the writer to move in a predetermined direction [e.g., show how Machiavelli refutes Plato] or an initial freedom that deprives the writer of support from a clearly defined problem [e.g., Plato and Machiavelli: discuss]” (328). So Professor Seligman, in noting the need to steer between the Scylla of our unspoken assumptions as experts wanting students to mimic our expertise and the Charybdis of an open-endedness that is really a total lack of structure and direction, has defined the difficult task we all face in constructing effective assignments, a task that is necessarily conditioned by our experiences as students and by our disciplinary training as experts in a chosen field.

A final point worth noting is the advantage of connecting the work of freshman seminars more purposefully to the demands of upper-level courses. As the scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning movement gains momentum, more professors of upper-division courses are experimenting with curricular changes that acknowledge the importance of

thoughtfully initiating students into expert practices. Some faculty members, responding to students' need to experience how experts "do" their discipline, have designed sequences of course assignments for that purpose. For example, at Cal State/LA, history professor Carole Srole teaches students in an upper-division general education class "how to test the validity of an author's arguments using primary sources," a skill both essential to historians and applicable to research-writing in other fields. The fundamental curricular revision she has undertaken surely has implications for the planning of freshman writing seminars, as it raises questions such as the following: How systematically are the skills she is fostering taught in typical freshman-level "research writing" classes? To what extent are the practices that are taught discipline-specific? To what extent should they be?

These are questions that arise within disciplines as well as between them. In my own department an informal survey of instructors who teach research-writing to freshmen revealed a wide range of practices based on differing assumptions about the skills that should be fostered at this level. For example, some instructors focused heavily on the "research" itself—the ferreting out of large numbers of sources, accurate compilation of a bibliography, etc.—while others who viewed this aspect of the process as relatively mechanical had students spend most of the semester synthesizing ideas from a small number of texts mostly supplied by the instructor. An increasingly essential skill in our (dis)information age is the ability to evaluate the quality of source materials and the expertise of authors, and I suspect that many professors of upper-level courses would agree that an entire semester devoted to practicing that skill alone would be time well spent. But how many freshman seminar instructors are required or encouraged to devise teaching strategies that foster these skills, so crucial to effective academic writing? And how many are mentored in doing so? Where there is little consistency even within a department, it is no wonder that students who complete "conventional" freshman English classes do not approach writing with a shared understanding of what effective writing is all about. When the disciplinary backgrounds of the instructors' differ, this effect is likely to be magnified, unless programs offer systematic faculty development opportunities, workshops in which ideas about epistemology and pedagogy can be aired and specific assignments (or, better, assignment sequences) shared and critiqued in a constructive environment. The careful curricular "scaffolding" evident in Professor Srole's course descriptions does not come naturally to most faculty in higher education, where the focus has been on the production of discipline-specific knowledge based on tacit epistemologies and independent of pedagogic concerns. Our academic programs are usually structured to accommodate increasingly challenging and specialized courses in the content areas. Perhaps it time for more of us to consider the value of a similarly vertical integration of skills enhancement. Such an integration requires, first, a understanding of what the essential skills are (including—and perhaps especially—an awareness of the epistemological and rhetorical assumptions embedded in every writing prompt.

I have been arguing that although academic experience and expertise are necessary to the success of writing pedagogy, they are not sufficient. The increasing availability of published work on the experience of teaching and learning within individual classrooms is a sign not only that faculty recognize the urgent need to make pedagogy a subject of professional discourse but also that classroom research into what our teaching strategies are and are not accomplishing is acquiring respectability. Because freshman seminars are typically a site for initiating students into the constraints and opportunities of academic work, they demand particular attention. Only by working collaboratively to unpack the demands and constraints of particular assignments in specific contexts can we readily understand the challenges and limitations of revising the freshman writing seminar, especially in the emerging contexts of current transformations. To be sure, the incentive to do this sort of work is mitigated by the entrenched reward systems that continue to divide teaching from scholarship and to cast deep revisions of classroom practice grounded in learning theory as far less valuable than the production of traditional research, even among many institutions whose mission is primarily teaching (Lazerson, Wagener, and Shumanis 19; Russell 302). In this context, it is worth noting that in many cases the writing instructors for the revised freshman programs are hired on a contract basis, rather than into tenure tracks. However, as the teaching of writing increasingly comes to be seen as the responsibility of a much broader constituency than English graduate students or adjuncts, the construction of effective writing assignments—along with the provision of appropriate support in meeting those demands—are obligations we will need to confront more intentionally, with attention to the best research on the related issues of disciplinary epistemologies (including definitions of problem-posing and problem-solving) and the differences between expert and novice practices. Only by thoughtfully engaging this responsibility can we hope to prepare students for the challenges of our more demanding upper-level courses across the curriculum.

Appendix

Memo sent to students in preparation for videotaped discussion of assignment design.

To: Jon, Nadine, Adrian, Tony [pseudonyms]

Hi all—Thank you all for agreeing to participate in the discussion group on assignment design. Our meeting, as noted earlier, is scheduled for Thursday, April 12, 6:15-7:45 PM in the TV/Radio studio (Second floor of Fine Arts)

Here are the assignments I mentioned in my email. Please look them over in advance so that we can have a really good discussion about what we professors think we are doing compared with what students like yourselves think when you get these assignments.

For your convenience, here are some “think-about” questions (some of you have already received these):

How are these assignments like or unlike the assignments you had in high school? Are they too easy, too difficult, or just about right for the level of class they were written for? Do they seem to ask for specific responses that the teacher has in mind, or are they more open-ended? (Are you expected to play “read the teacher’s mind”?) Do they invite imaginative or creative responses or mainly conventional types of analysis and argument? (Which kind you prefer?) Do they prompt critical thinking? How? (or why not?) Would this kind of assignment prepare you for the kinds of thinking/reading/writing you are asked to do in other classes?

This is not a test! It’s a chance for us pros to find out what you really think of how we’re doing. You do not have to write anything down although you can scribble some notes if you want to. Your honest thinking on these issues (or whichever of them seem most interesting to you)~plus any others that strike you as interesting or important regarding assignment design~will be very much appreciated. The discussion should be informal and even fun.

Cheers, [XXX]

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